Weather, Macroweather, and the Climate
Weather, Macroweather, and the Climate

OUR RANDOM YET PREDICTABLE ATMOSPHERE

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CONTENTS

List of boxes ix
Preface xi
Acknowledgments xv

1 Zooming through scales by the billion 1
   1.1 What is weather? What is climate? 1
      1.1.1 High level or low level? 1
      1.1.2 Space and time 12
   1.2 Zooming in time: The age of Earth to milliseconds 20
      1.2.1 Paleoindicators 20
      1.2.2 Instrumental temperatures 21
   1.3 Zooming in space: From the size of the planet and from the top to the bottom 23
      1.3.1 Horizontal 23
      1.3.2 Vertical 24
   1.4 The unfinished nonlinear revolution: Junk your old equations and look for guidance in clouds . . . 28
      1.4.1 The development of numerical models 28
      1.4.2 The nonlinear backlash 30
      1.4.3 Complexity science 33
   1.5 An overview of this book 34

2 New worlds versus scaling: From van Leeuwenhoek to Mandelbrot 40
   2.1 Scalebound thinking and the missing quadrillion 40
      2.1.1 New worlds and spectral bumps 40
      2.1.2 New worlds and the meteorological zoo 55
   2.2 Scaling: Big whirls have little whirls and little whirls have lesser whirls 56
      2.2.1 The fractal revolution 56
      2.2.2 Fractal sets and dimensions 59
      2.2.3 Fractal lines and wiggliness 66
      2.2.4 Richardson 74
   2.3 Fluctuation analysis as a microscope 80

3 How big is a cloud? 95
   3.1 Fractals: Where’s the physics? 95
      3.1.1 Symmetries 95
      3.1.2 Zooming and squashing 98
   3.2 Zooming, squashing, and rotating, and the emergence of scale 106
      3.2.1 The scaling of the laws 106
      3.2.2 What is scale? 107
      3.2.3 What about real clouds? 113
## Contents

3.2.4 Simulating anisotropic scaling, fractals, and clouds 115  
3.2.5 The 23/9 D model 117  
3.2.6 The emergence of scale 120  
3.3 Zooming with squashing and rotation, and the phenomenological fallacy 120  
3.3.1 Generalized scale invariance 120  
3.3.2 Anisotropic multifractals 124  
3.3.3 Anisotropy that changes from place to place as well as scale to scale: Nonlinear GSI 131  
3.3.4 The phenomenological fallacy 135  

4 The weather: Nothing but turbulence . . . and don't mind the gap 142  
4.1 Turbulence and the mesoscale 142  
4.2 A convenient gap and Richardson's posthumous vindication 149  
4.3 Science: A human enterprise 152  
4.4 The rise of nonlinear geoscience 158  
4.5 The triumph of scaling stratification 166  
4.6 The atmosphere as a heat engine and the lifetime–size relation 168  
4.7 The weather–macroweather transition 170  
4.8 The twin planet 173  

5 Macroweather, the climate, and beyond 185  
5.1 Macroweather planet 185  
5.2 Macroweather, climates, and climate states 190  
5.3 What's macroweather like? 193  
5.4 Why not “microclimate?” 200  
5.5 Climate states, climates of models, and historical and Last Millennium simulations 203  
5.6 Is civilization the result of freak macroweather? 210  
5.7 The multiproxy revolution 216  
5.8 Ice Ages and the macro- and megaclimate regimes 218  
5.9 The death of Gaia 222  

6 What have we done? 233  
6.1 Into the fray 233  
6.2 The damage so far 237  
6.3 Testing the GNF hypothesis 244  
  6.3.1 Untangling forced and unforced variability 244  
  6.3.2 Simplistic or simple? 246  
6.4 Why the warming can't be natural 252  
6.5 What was shown 256  
6.6 The pause 257  
6.7 The $100,000 GNF 261
Contents

7 Macroweather predictions and climate projections 273
  7.1 Predictability Limits, forecast skill, and system memory 273
    7.1.1 Deterministic predictability 273
    7.1.2 Stochastic predictability 277
    7.1.3 System memory 278
  7.2 Harnessing butterflies: Stochastic macroweather forecasting 283
    7.2.1 The role of space 283
    7.2.2 Stochastic macroweather forecasts: A killer app? 285
    7.2.3 Regional forecasting 289
    7.2.4 CanSIPS to StocSIPS: from Supercomputers to Laptops 291
  7.3 Our Children’s world: Scaling and climate projections 295
    7.3.1 Predictions and projections 295
    7.3.2 Projecting to 2100: The historical method 306
    7.3.3 Global-scale projections 307
    7.3.4 Regional projections 308

Conclusions: Richardson’s dreams 316

List of abbreviations 319
Glossary 323
Index 329
{ LIST OF BOXES }

1.1 Which chaos?  
1.2 Zooming through deep time in the Phanerozoic  
2.1 Lucy’s fluctuations  
2.2 Intermittency, multifractals, and the α model  
2.3 Fluctuations and the fractal $H$ model  
3.1 Multifractal butterflies, gray and black swans, extreme events, and tipping points  
4.1 Aircraft turbulence: It’s not just the bumps!  
5.1 What’s the temperature of Earth?  
5.2 Volcanoes and sunspots  
5.3 Hockey stick wars and multiproxy science  
5.4 Ice Ages and orbital forcing  
6.1 The atmospheric greenhouse effect  
6.2 Return periods and the pause  
7.1 Earth’s (fractional) energy balance, storage, and memory  
7.2 Finite and infinite memories  
7.3 SLIMM: The role of the distant past and forecasting GCM control runs  
7.4 GCMs and macroweather forecasts: CanSIPS and CanStoc  
7.5 Climate projections with the MME  
7.6 The International Committee for Projecting the Consequences of Coal Consumption: Hindprojections with Representative Coal and Petroleum Pathway 1.45  
7.7 A looming uncertainty crisis  
7.8 Using scaling to improve the memory of the historical approach
In the closing months of the first world war, Lewis Fry Richardson made the first numerical weather forecast, founding the field of numerical weather prediction (NWP). Today, with the help of computers, this brute-force approach has been wildly successful. It is not only ubiquitous in daily weather forecasts, but also has been extended to seasonal predictions through to multidecadal climate projections. It is (almost) the unique tool used to inform policymakers about the climatological consequences of fossil fuel burning and other human impacts.

Yet Richardson was not only the founder of NWP, he also pioneered the development of high-level turbulent laws. In 1926, he proposed the "Richardson 4/3 law" of turbulent diffusion—a law that wasn’t fully vindicated until 2013. Rather than attempting to account for every whirl, cloud, eddy, and structure, the 4/3 law exploits the idea of scaling—a statistical relation between big and small, between fast and slow—to account for and understand the statistical outcome of billions upon billions of structures acting collectively from millimeters up to the size of the planet. Just as the diffusion of milk stirred in a cup of coffee doesn’t require tracking every molecule, so too can the atmosphere be understood without knowledge of every bump and wiggle on every cloud.

The idea that high-level statistical laws could explain the actions of myriads of vortices, cells, and structures was shared by successive generations of turbulence scientists. Unfortunately, they faced monumental mathematical difficulties largely connected to turbulent intermittency: the fact that most of the activity is inside tiny, violently active regions, themselves buried in a hierarchy of structures within structures. The application of turbulence theory to the atmosphere encounters an additional obstacle: stratification that depends on scale. Although small puffs of smoke seem to be roughly roundish—or even vertically aligned—on a good day, even the naked eye can make out wide horizontal cloud decks that allow us to glimpse chunks of giant strata thousands of kilometers across.

The 1980s marked a turning point when Richardson’s deterministic and statistical strands parted company, and when the precarious unity of the atmospheric sciences was broken. On the one hand, computers revolutionized NWP, making the brute-force approach increasingly practical and hence prevalent. On the other hand, the nonlinear revolution—its a tributary of computers—promised to tame chaos itself, including turbulent chaos with its fractal structures within structures. Throughout the next decades, scientific societies promoted nonlinear science by establishing nonlinear processes divisions and journals. While the nonlinear approaches were advancing understanding, NWPs mushroomed and extended their number crunching to include oceans and the climate.
This book is an insider’s attempt to reunite the two strands. It contains some history and a few human touches, but mostly it explains, as simply as possible, how we can understand atmospheric variability that occurs over an astonishing range of scales: from millimeters to the size of the planet, from milliseconds to billions of years. The variability is so large that standard ways of dealing with it are utterly inadequate. In 2015, it was found that classic approaches had underestimated the variability by the astronomical factor of a quadrillion (a million billion).

Although familiar treatments focus on a series of “scalebound” mechanisms, each operating over a narrow range of scales ranging from meteorological fronts to convective cells to storm systems—or from El Niño to global warming—in this book I take you by the hand and show you the atmosphere in a new light. Helped by high-level scaling laws operating over enormous ranges of scales from small to large, from fast to slow, I explain this new thing called “macroweather” and describe how it sits in between the weather and climate, finally settling the question: What is climate? I discuss how agriculture—and hence civilization itself—might be a result of freak macroweather.

I answer Richardson’s old question: Does the wind have a velocity? And the newer one: How big is a cloud? The answer turns out to explain why the dimension of atmospheric motions is \( D = \frac{23}{9} = 2.555... \), which is more voluminous than theoreticians’ flat value \( D = 2 \), yet less space filling than the human-scale value \( D = 3 \). I show that Mars is our statistical twin and why this shouldn’t surprise us. I explain how the multifractal butterfly effect gives rise to events that are so extreme they have been called black swans. I show how—even accounting for the black swans—we can close the climate debate by statistically testing and rejecting the skeptics’ giant natural fluctuation hypothesis. I explain how the emergent scaling laws can make accurate monthly to decadal (macroweather) forecasts by exploiting an unsuspected but huge memory in the atmosphere–ocean system itself. I playfully imagine a 1909 International Committee for Projecting the Consequences of Coal Consumption to show how a good scenario of economic development might have led—one hundred years in advance—to accurate projections of our current 1°C of global warming, and I’ll show how the same scaling approach can help to reduce significantly the large uncertainties in our current climate projections to 2050 and 2100.

This book is aimed at anyone interested in the weather and climate; it assumes only some basic mathematics: power laws and their inverse, logarithms. However, for those who wish to delve beyond the basic narrative, there are extensive footnotes and endnotes. The footnotes are reserved for supplementary—but nontechnical—information, comments, and occasional anecdotes. The endnotes are more technical in nature, aimed at readers who want to dig deeper.* In addition, there are also more than a dozen “boxes” that give even more technical information and

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* Many of the references may be freely downloaded from the site: http://www.physics.mcgill.ca/~gang/reference.list.htm.
Preface

explanations. Although they are placed in the text at advantageous locations, they are designed to be “stand-alone” and can be either skipped or read in any desired order. Overall, there was an attempt to make the book interesting and accessible to readers with a wide range of backgrounds.

The book will have achieved its goal if you achieve a new, unified understanding of the atmosphere and if it convinces you that the atmosphere is not what you thought.